

**Reconciling Bloomsbury's Aesthetics of Formalism
with the Politics of Anti-Imperialism:
Roger Fry's and Clive Bell's Interpretations of Chinese Art**

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Abstract

This essay studies the Bloomsbury School's opposition to British imperial power and World War I, and how this opposition found expression in their views on art, Chinese art in particular. Roger Fry's troubled sense of cultural and class identity, as well as his clash with the reigning cultural orthodoxy caused him to see Chinese art, in its historical development and potentiality, as a welcome antidote to the Western model of domination. The Bloomsbury school's appropriation of Chinese art, while suggesting an alternate genealogy for British Modernism, also puts into question the use made of Chinese art by Fry.

Keywords

Bloomsbury, Roger Fry, Clive Bell, modernism, imperialism,
liberalism, aesthetics, Chinese Art

To date, with the exception of Basil Gray, neither scholars of Chinese art nor those of British Modernism have addressed the impact of Chinese art on British aesthetic Modernism. In an important but overlooked essay in 1973, "The Development of Taste in Chinese Art in the West, 1872 to 1972," Gray wrote about British studies of Chinese art preceding World War I:

The other characteristic of this period was the aesthetic approach, linking the appreciation of Chinese art with the avant-garde movements in contemporary art and with the widening of vision to include such things as Byzantine and negro art. In all this ... Roger Fry was a key figure, who sought for a unity in all great periods of art.... (23)

Taking my cue from Gray, I will address the connection between Chinese art and British Modernism, as seen from the perspective of Fry and his fellow Bloomsbury aesthete Clive Bell. Since Fry was the most significant critic to link Chinese art with British Modernism, unless his importance in this context is recognized and Chinese art is accorded its proper importance in accounts of the development of British Modernism, the “genealogy of Modernism”¹ will not be complete and the narratives of British Modernism we have will remain partial and fragmentary. Fry’s cultural position is much more complicated than most mainstream critics of modernism and the avant-garde have acknowledged, especially his widening of the entire vista of non-Western art in Western culture, and it bears heavily on the developments of both.

In order to reestablish the importance of Fry and Bell to British Modernism, I will first address the prevailing critical reception of their work in their own day and their relevance to modernism. I will discuss the tension between formalism and political activism in their writings, and the contradictions inherent in the kind of British liberalism they both espoused. In doing so, I hope to show that Fry’s and Bell’s interpretations of Chinese art functioned as a lens through which philosophical and political contradictions in modernism may be more clearly viewed. Because they did not see Chinese art in its cultural context, their writings about Chinese art revealed more about themselves and British Modernism than about Chinese art. That is the paradox of their apparently apolitical formalism: their formalist rhetoric regarding the affinities between Chinese art and Western art reveals a contradiction between, on the one hand, their liberal respect for another culture, and, on the other, their imperialist appropriation of another culture for the cause of modernist art. Finally, I hope to provide a dialectical reading that suggests the ambiguity between

¹ The phrase “genealogy of Modernism” belongs of course to Michael A. Levenson; see his *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine, 1908-1922*. There are more recent lineages that have been constructed.

formalist advocacy of Chinese art and the imperial and colonial context in which the modernist encountering of Chinese art took place. The Bloomsbury conceptualization of a world art and a cultural globalism, a concept couched in formalist terms, was in many respects a result of liberalization—a general tendency of modernization and of coming into contact with other cultures at a point when the British Empire was in the process of losing its dominance. Thus, the Bloomsbury group reflected the British Empire's cultural imperialism, Orientalism, and primitivism—concepts formed within the wider history of its imperial relationship with China.

Fry scholars tend to fall into two groups, pro-Bloomsbury and anti-Bloomsbury. Judith Collins, Jacqueline Falkenheim and other members of the old school of biographical and critical studies all belong to the pro-Bloomsbury group. This school emphasizes the importance of Fry's Post-Impressionism to British Modernism, especially the significance of his first Post-Impressionist exhibition in 1910. Peter Stansky's *On or About December 1910* is exemplary of this traditional view that Fry was particularly important not only for making French painters much better known in the Anglo-American world, but also for making English artists part of the European movement of modernism.

Critics of the avant-garde, however, tend to deprecate the efforts of Bloomsburyites to modernize British art and literature and sneer at Bloomsbury's snobbish liberalism. Hugh Kenner, for instance, in *The Pound Era* does not even mention Fry's name and summarily discards "his ilk," saying "so Eliot coexisted with treacly minds, Clive Bell's and Mrs. Woolf's" (553). When Kenner cares to mention Fry, in *A Sinking Island*, he describes him as merely a passive, makeshift character: "Thus history created a role for Roger Fry" (129). Finally, Kenner dismisses Bell's best-seller *Art* as "a piece of graceful twaddle still reprinted" (134).

Michael Levenson and Sanford Schwartz equally overlook Bloomsbury's significance. Levenson in *A Genealogy of Modernism* (1984) mentions neither Woolf nor Forster, and virtually ignores Fry and Bell. Levenson posits a version of modernism that consists primarily of Hulme, Pound, Lewis, Eliot and the Imagists. In *A Matrix of Modernism* (1985), Schwartz establishes a similarly narrow canon. He attends to the issues of abstraction, representation and formalism in Pound, Eliot and early twentieth-century thought without paying any heed to the Bloomsburyites' contributions to, and their significant influence on, these aesthetic concerns.

Among these critics, Charles Harrison proffers the most sustained leftist critique of the Bloomsbury group; his *English Art and Modernism* ties the Bloomsburyites to a reactionary social vision. Applying a model of Marxist class conflict, Harrison sees the history of modernism as a competition between two significant and contrasting interests. Harrison describes one camp, represented by Ruskin and Morris, as being concerned with the social function of art, and the other, epitomized by Whistler, embodying the contrasting point of view that art should be valued in terms of a set of culturally autonomous interests. For Harrison, the formalism of Bloomsbury, following Whistler, betokened a countertrend against social realism. Harrison argues that the formalist discourse that comprised modernist thought and concerned "disinterestedness" was derived largely from the writings of Fry and Bell. This strand of formalism, Harrison claims, recognized art as a territory of "purity" and "autonomy." In sum, Harrison accuses Fry and Bell of propagating a pernicious formalism that severs the vital link between art and the experience of everyday life.

Recently, Simon Watney and Frances Spalding have been engaged, as these opposing groups of critics have been, in a similar and heated debate over Bloomsbury, especially over how to relate Fry's formalistic modernism to our own postmodern age. In 1984, Watney criticized Fry's writings for their general disregard for social contexts. In a

resonant rejoinder, “Roger Fry and His Critics in a Post-Modernist Age,” in the 1986 issue of *Burlington Magazine*, Spalding rebuked this reductive rendition of Fry for being elitist. Yet, in another reply to Spalding in the 1987 issue of *Burlington Magazine*, Watney asked, since no one today seriously questioned Fry’s role as the leading *accoucheur* of modernism in Britain, “[w]hat possible point could there be in 1987 in trying to resurrect the art debates of the First World War period *on their own terms?*” (251).

Fortunately for my own work, in answering the question of Fry’s relevance to our postmodern age, Christopher Reed, in the 1996 *A Roger Fry Reader*, presages what a new, more sensitive reading of Fry would be, one that would reject taking either a pro or anti position vis-à-vis Bloomsbury. In contrast to the traditional view that the history of Bloomsbury belongs to the history of modernism, Reed’s remaking of Bloomsbury seeks, as he says in the introduction, “to describe Fry’s activism in its historical context, with reference to the concerns and interests associated with postmodernism” (4). Reed suggests that Fry was in between being a modernist and postmodernist. To answer Watney’s criticism that Fry’s “theory of the universality of aesthetic value” was “totally incompatible with any type of crudely avant-gardist historiography” (251), Reed shows that inside the modernist Fry, there was, however, always a postmodernist provocateur. That is to say, Fry’s privileging of the subjective experience of aesthetic emotion reflected his modernist side, while Fry’s antagonism toward authority represented his postmodernist side. To claim to return Fry to his “historical context,” Reed portrays Fry as a postmodern provocateur of the establishment.

My only critiques of Reed are that, in his self-styled postmodernist revision of Fry’s role, Reed regrettably includes very few of Fry’s discussions on Chinese art, and unfortunately underestimates the thoroughness of Fry’s modernism. Like the pro-Fry and anti-Fry accounts that Reed intends to correct, Reed’s postmodernist remaking of Fry remains a Eurocentric enterprise. Like most critics, Reed sees Fry as a connection between

British Modernism and continental modernism: “The taste Fry influenced was primarily that of the anglophone world, and his success lay largely in alerting an educated public to a compelling version of recent artistic and critical developments of the Parisian avant-garde” (1).

In an even more recent review of Reed’s anthology, “Bloomsbury Revised: A ‘Postmodern’ Roger Fry,” Hilton Kramer faults Reed for distorting the historical context, and trying “to annex Fry—the greatest modernist critic of his day—to the bandwagon of postmodernism” (15). Kramer complains that in order to fit Fry into the postmodern picture of a provocateur, Reed elides Fry’s most representative aesthetic writings. As he points out, Reed’s *Roger Fry Reader* completely neglects two collections of Fry’s critical essays that have long been regarded as classic contributions to the literature of modernism, *Vision and Design* (1920) and *Transformations* (1926). Kramer writes:

Activism, which is to say social activism, is an enterprise dear to the hearts of every true postmodernist, whereas criticism—especially the kind of formalist criticism that Fry practiced in the heyday of his fame and influence—is regarded as mere grist for the postmodernist’s deconstructionist mill. It is very much to Mr. Reed’s purpose in assembling and annotating *A Roger Fry Reader* for a new generation of readers—readers unlikely to be familiar with Fry’s writings on art—to give priority to what he describes as Fry’s “sense of social purpose” while at the same time discounting the criticism that established Fry as the leading champion of modernism in the English-speaking world of his generation. (15)

Is there, then, a way to make Fry relevant to the postmodern era without appearing to accept his Eurocentrism or distorting the historical fact that he was a hard-core modernist? In this study, I argue that one possible solution is first to place Fry’s formalism within the historical context of British liberalism and imperialism, and then to look at the cross-cultural impact of Fry’s formalism. In that way, we do not have to discredit Fry’s formalism in acknowledging Fry’s activism. We can acknowledge the benefits of a formalism that privileged sensibility in aesthetic experience, for, after all, formalism was considered progressive in its time and an inevitable tool for combating moralism and didacticism and opening up the aesthetic horizons of world art. But we can also

acknowledge the limitations of Fry's formalism which overlooked the socio-historical context of art. I argue that this ambivalence was inherent in Fry's formalism, and that this contradiction itself constituted one of the many paradoxes of modernism.

I. Paradoxes of Formalism

Traditionally, Fry and Bell have been considered the most significant contributors to the formalist school of thought, emphasizing the autonomy of compositional elements: in painting the elements of line, color and texture; and in sculpture, those of plasticity, planes and mass. It has also been said of them that they felt that art should cease to tell a story or to express philosophical ideas, and should oppose representation.

This view of Fry's and Bell's formalism as severing art from life, however, is not complete. Fry and Bell both used formalism to help reappraise unconventional art and to help people appreciate art across cultural boundaries. Formalism occurred at the same time that various unconventional Western and non-Western artworks were brought to London, and while other modernists were traveling to other parts of the world to see non-Western art. The arts of Byzantium, China, South America and Africa were coming into vogue—arts which did not easily fit into the Western canon of post-Renaissance illusionism. The Western horizon was thus enormously expanded. How one might understand or appreciate non-canonical artworks and how one might respond to or be moved by the art of different cultures therefore became a pressing task for these liberal critics. Formalism became a key to appreciating world art.

To the credit of Fry and Bell, after centuries of exclusion, Chinese art entered the broadened mainline Western discussion of world art and history. The orthodox view at that time was that European culture, emerging out of classical Greece, was the centerpiece of the world, and that Chinese art was a marginal development and hardly to be taken

seriously. By arguing that Oriental art ought not to be excluded from art history, Fry and Bell collided with and challenged mainstream Western histories of art.

The notion that world art developed individually independently was significantly recent and progressive in Fry's and Bell's time. Chinese art also became an important part of the Bloomsburyites' conceptualization of world art. Fry's posthumously-published *Last Lectures*, for instance, based on his Cambridge lecture notes, summarized his global conceptualization of world aesthetics, starting with Egyptian art and covering Mesopotamian and Aegean, "Negro," American, Chinese, Indian and Greek art. This concept of world art and visual globalism was a direct result of their liberal cosmopolitanism. Bell traced Oriental and European art to their conjoined universality, an eternal form of art, embodied by the significant form. To Bell, the universal history of art assumed the look of a map in which several streams descended from the same range of mountains to the same sea. As he wrote in *Art*, "The whole history of art from earliest times in all parts of the world" was like "water that flows down the river, but there is more than one channel: for instance, there is European art and Oriental" (121-22).

In thereby subverting the post-Renaissance canon of verisimilitude, Fry and Bell paved the way for the reception of non-representational and non-perspectival Chinese art. Arguing that the Renaissance-derived concern with outward similitude was only superficial, and that inward similarity in spirit counted most, they purposefully turned the hierarchy around and privileged what used to be thought of as "unscientific" primitive art over what used to be thought of as "scientific" realism. Their arguments effectively created space for Chinese religious art in England.

Formalism is therefore equivocal. Seen positively, it was able to open up the Western canon and offer easier accessibility to the art of another culture. For instance, Bell challenged Europeans to look at Chinese art as such, to ignore Chinese philosophical development, and not to be daunted by the cultural baggage of the Chinese textual

tradition. In “Art in Art Criticism,” collected in *Since Cézanne* (1922), he argued that one need not be familiar with “the later developments of Buddhist metaphysics as modified by Taoist mysticism” in order to understand Sung painting (93). Bell said in a footnote in *Art* that Europeans who “respond immediately to the significant forms of great Oriental art, are left cold by the trivial pieces of anecdote and social criticism so lovingly cherished by Chinese dilettanti” (36-37). Besides, at that early stage of the British discovery of Chinese painting, one can only judge a Chinese work strictly on its merits, as writer Lewis Einstein noted in *Burlington Magazine* 21 (1912): “The bridges and avenues rendering it [Chinese painting] comprehensible are still missing. In one sense this is advantageous for pure aesthetic criticism” (“Some” 185).

Seen negatively, however, formalism was insufficient to create an understanding of art form within its cultural context. In ignoring Chinese philosophy and culture, Fry and Bell alike paid particular attention to the shape, form and design of Chinese bronzes and Wei statues without really taking into account their ritual and religious functions. If Fry and Bell were aware of the religious and social aspects of Chinese art, those aspects were never as significant as the aesthetic ones. To see a traditional Chinese painting as merely lines and colors misses the cultural investment of that art, because in the Chinese context, art rarely existed alone as art. Traditional Chinese painting, especially Sung painting, has frequently been employed to metaphorically express philosophical ideas, personal ideals, lamentation, or even political protest. A scholarly study of traditional Chinese painting usually takes all these aspects into account, hence Chinese art scholarship has to deal with studies of miscellaneous literary, religious, social and political allusion and critique, and often negotiates diverse disciplines such as biographical studies, history, archaeology, literary analysis and sociological critique.² In the 1983 resonant study of *Art, Myth, and*

² David N. Keightley argues for the significance of religious context for early Chinese art especially. See his “Ancient Chinese Art: Contexts, Constraints, and Pleasures,” “Death, the Individual, and the Supernatural,”

Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China, Kwang-chih Chang argues that studies of ancient Chinese art were inextricably related to politics.

Perhaps the chief discrepancy between critics pro and con of Fry and Bell lies in the contrast between Fry's and Bell's activism and their deceptively apolitical formalist criticism. That is, Fry's and Bell's formalist modernism was a product of myriad layers of cultural paradoxes. One paradox was that formalism was born from a liberalism and anti-imperialist impulse that allowed for both cultural expansion and the expansion of the horizon of world art. That is, in order to understand the significance of another culture and to appreciate Chinese art that was brought into London through imperial expansion, Fry advocated an aesthetic system of world art that transcended cultural and natural boundaries and divisions. As he noted in his 1934 *Reflections on British Painting*, "[The] artist's allegiance is towards an ideal end which has nothing to do with the boundaries between nations" (21). Fry's exclusion of patriotism in art appreciation was well in line with his distrust of political patriotism and jingoism.

Yet, to see Fry's and Bell's modernism as only an apolitical formal concern with "purity" and "aesthetic appreciation" would be too reductive an approach. Formalism was political. Bell wrote in the catalogue of the 1912 *The Second Post Impressionist Exhibition* that the works of English post-impressionists under the lead of Fry was "revolutionary": "in choice of subject they recognize no authority but the truth that is in them." Bell contrasted English post-impressionists to the Royal Academy painters, with their endless series of official portraits and subjects that, as Bell borrowed a phrase from Virginia

and "Art and Ancestor Worship," in Watson's *Early Civilization in China*; "The Religious Commitment: Shang Theology and the Genesis of Chinese Political Culture," and "Archaeology and Mentality: The Making of China." Jean M. James argues for the importance of context when interpreting Han funerary art. See "Interpreting Han Funerary Art: The Importance of Context." James argues that Buddhist and Hindu religious arts especially deserve such contextual studies, because they employ iconographic programmes. It is generally understood that the meaning of the various subjects comprising these programmes is dependent on their contexts and on the purpose the imagery is intended to serve.

Woolf, “preach doctrines, sing songs, or celebrate the glories of the British Empire” (qtd. in Reed 54). In addition, the body of aesthetic literature of humanistic liberalism and formalist modernism coexisted with the fact that many Bloomsbury members and associates, including John Maynard Keynes, Bell, Virginia and Leonard Woolf, E. M. Forster, and Arthur Waley, worked against imperialism and opposed the Empire at home.

II. Eclectic Cosmopolitanism

To better understand the politics of Fry’s formalism, we must examine liberal cosmopolitanism. The wide-ranging sources of his knowledge of, and contact with, Chinese art demonstrate an intimate link between Chinese art and British Modernism, and further point to the cosmopolitanism of London Modernism. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, in *A Study of Roger Fry and Virginia Woolf from a Chinese Perspective* (1978), has stated: “I found hardly any evidence of special interest in Chinese culture in the writings of Bloomsbury members.”³ However, Bloomsbury’s connection with China went far deeper than Wong thought. Wong has argued from a Chinese perspective that Fry’s work showed an affinity with Chinese thought, but she ignored the profuse evidence attesting to Fry’s actual connection with Chinese art and thought. Fry was writing on Chinese art and reviewing Chinese art exhibitions at a time when London dominated the Chinese art market, thus revealing the intricate ties between London’s colonial and postcolonial cosmopolitanism and Bloomsbury’s broad-minded liberalism and anti-imperialism.

³ In the footnote 2, page 418, Wong provides us with a few exceptions: “Lytton Strachey’s review of Herbert A Giles’s well-known translation of Chinese poetry appears standard.... G. Lowes Dickinson’s *Letters from John Chinaman* merely uses the persona of a Chinese traveller and has little to do with China. Interestingly enough, many of Dickinson’s contemporaries were enthusiastic about it, and some even believed the author to be Chinese!... Fry himself read Dickinson’s book and liked it.... The famous scholar and translator of Chinese literature, Arthur Waley, knew some Bloomsbury members but did not, strictly speaking, belong to the group.”

Fry epitomized the cosmopolitan aesthetic critic of the early twentieth century. His knowledge of sources about Chinese art is much larger and his influence concerning Chinese art much vaster than usually presumed. Furthermore, his knowledge was not limited to literary and textual sources. The private and public collections, European and Chinese alike, that he saw in European global centers allowed him to formulate his ideas of Chinese art, and hence they form the connection between his cosmopolitanism and his formalist modernism. His immense direct knowledge of Chinese art reflects the cosmopolitan culture that molded him into an advocate of Chinese art. As a buyer for the Metropolitan Museum from 1905-1910 and as a leading art critic who constantly reviewed exhibitions of Chinese art and Western art, he traveled widely among the major world cities, London, Paris, New York, Brussels and others.⁴

Nothing reflects Fry's liberal eclectic cosmopolitanism better than the *Burlington Magazine*. As an editor and close associate, he was part of the close-knit intellectual network of British critics of Western art and British scholars of Chinese art. Through the magazine, Fry was able to promote Chinese art. While working on his first Post-Impressionist exhibition, he became the co-editor of the journal with Lionel Cust, from 1910 until 1913, securing a conspicuous position for Chinese art in England's leading art journal. Articles on Chinese art were published side by side with Western art and other

⁴ In 1905-1910 Fry worked as a curator and buyer for both the Metropolitan Museum and for John G. Johnson (1841-1917), an American lawyer, collector, and Trustee of the Metropolitan Museum. How much power Fry had in directing the Metropolitan Museum's, Morgan's or Johnson's personal purchasing policy of Chinese art remains yet to be investigated. Fry certainly had influence, as shown by his recommendation to Johnson on 6 May 1909, writing from Guildford, near London, "Also I have found at Brussels a marvellous collection of early Chinese and Japanese paintings which we ought to get as a nucleus for our Museum" (Sutton 1: 321). This Metropolitan Museum post must have given Fry ample chances to view Chinese art among the most outstanding European and North American collections, as his job involved traveling frequently on "buying expeditions in Europe" (Tompkins 109-10; V. Woolf, *Roger* 189-90). During this period, Fry would have seen superlative private Chinese art collections. For instance, in 1906, after seeing the Oriental collections amassed by Sir William van Horne, a Canadian entrepreneur, Fry praised Horne's "first-rate early Chinese Sung pieces;" see Fry's letter to his wife, Helen Fry, 2 Dec. 1906 (Sutton 1: 275).

non-Western art. Furthermore, Fry not only wrote, but also constantly published others' writings on Chinese art.

Fry's liberal cosmopolitanism instigated much canon-shifting and many rediscoveries. He did this within Western art history as well as with world art as seen through Western eyes. For instance, as Sir Anthony Blunt noted in 1965, Fry was among the first English critics to write with understanding of El Greco, of Italian baroque painting, and of the so-called late-Medieval Primitives (6). As Sir C. J. Holmes wrote his memorial of Fry in 1934, "So far as the Italian Primitives were concerned he had no superior in England; in the case of the French Primitives, he had no equal" (*Self* 146). Fry was also influential in discovering non-Western art, such as African and other tribal art, and the arts of China and Persia. As D. S. MacColl eulogized in an obituary, Fry "was ready to explore the neglected 'Seicento' as he had in more canonical times, and to go outside of Europe to the Congo and Cathay" (235). His efforts in championing marginalized art were also closely linked with the "discovery" of the late nineteenth-century French modern painting of Seurat, Cézanne, Van Gogh and Matisse, whose works in the early twentieth century were still considered outside the mainstream. Fry prepared the way for the understanding of an art which was then being viewed with hostility by most English critics.

Fry's promotion of traditionally unrecognized art should thus be placed in the context of liberal cosmopolitanism. As Raymond Williams argued in the seminal 1980 article, "The Significance of 'Bloomsbury' as a Social and Cultural Group," in the early twentieth century there was a trend of liberalization and modernization as a result of changing social circumstances (59). Fry was influenced by, and at the same time contributed to, this trend. Indeed, as early as 1901, Fry set out to dispel previous misconceptions of Chinese art. In 1901 he became a regular art critic for the *Athenaeum*. Around that time, he started to review Chinese sales and exhibitions. After seeing a show of Chinese art at the Whitechapel Gallery, Fry, in *Athenaeum*, 3 August 1901, praised a considerable number of

fine examples. He took exception to the nineteenth-century cultural imperialist attitude against Chinese art. For instance, about item no. 186, an exquisite bronze mirror mounted on the back of a reclining cow, he noted that “all traces of barbaric crudity have disappeared” (“Chinese” 165). Fry praised “the high standard of craftsmanship, the sensitiveness to the quality of the material, and the strenuous desire for perfection which mark the best Chinese work.” Fry stated clearly that he intended to redress the lingering nineteenth-century cultural-imperialist belief “that Chinese civilization is not only different, but also incalculably inferior to our own.”

Fry’s Slade professorship at Cambridge is also symbolic of a new era of British understanding of Chinese art. In 1933, just one year before he died, Fry accepted the Slade Professorship of Fine Art at Cambridge, his *alma mater*. Fry’s strong penchant for Chinese art can be seen from the fact, according to Virginia Woolf, when preparing these Slade lectures, Fry became “head over heels in Chinese art, and hardly [knew] how to get through in time” (*Roger* 287). To Gamel Brenan, a friend, Fry wrote on 12 April 1934, “I’m struggling with next term’s lectures: early Chinese, Hindu Khmer and then Greece and Rome. It’s a large order and I could willingly devote the whole term to Chinese” (Sutton 2: 690).

Fry’s academic recognition and acute criticism was coupled with an apparently effortless entrée into the overlapping social worlds of Britain’s upper class and governing elite, as his final acceptance as Slade Professor of Art at Cambridge symbolized. With that move, among others, we may say that Chinese art glided effortlessly into the elite British cultural-consciousness and became part of that cultural formation. By the time the era-making Great Exhibition of Chinese Art was held in the Royal Academy in 1935, although Fry did not live long enough to attend (an accidental fall in August 1934 prematurely curtailed Fry’s life), the show nonetheless was imprinted with his influence. It would not be an overstatement to say that the show epitomized Fry’s more-than-three-decades’

cultivation of a British audience for Chinese art. Clearly Fry was the key in changing the British perception of Chinese art from that of an age of nineteenth-century cultural imperialism to that of the modernist phase. From Dr. Samuel Johnson's jibe that Chinese did not have high art but pottery, and John Ruskin's maligning of Chinese art as wrought by pagans, to Fry's advocacy of Chinese art, the change is dramatic. Chinese art was now discussed in leading journals, taught in universities, and talked about by leading art critics and artists. It had entered British elite culture.

III. Rhetorical Paradoxes of Formalism: Homogenizing Chinese Art

The previous discussion of Post-Impressionism indicated that Fry and Bell invented a new modernist rhetoric of Chinese art. But Fry's rhetorical use of Chinese art cannot be understood without exploring how he invented new discourses on Chinese art. Since, as Basil pointed out, Fry was the most important link between Chinese art and British Modernism, I am particularly interested in how he invented new discourses on Chinese art. The irony is that when they endeavored to dispel nineteenth-century Orientalist and cultural-imperialist misconceptions of Chinese art, at the same time they created more modernist misconceptions of Chinese art. That is to say, their rhetoric of Chinese art functioned paradoxically, at once submitting to Chinese aesthetic conventions while appropriating Chinese art for modernist aesthetics. Their rhetoric of Chinese art intriguingly negotiated between an older *Chinoiserie* tradition and primitivization, between rationalization and anti-rationalization, between Orientalism and anti-Orientalism.

Rhetorically, Fry refashioned Chinese art as if it was within reach of the West. He de-exoticized Chinese art, toned down its outlandishness and assimilated it to the Western

tradition. In other words, he homogenized Chinese art. In doing so, Fry reacted against the earlier *Chinoiserie* tradition, arguing that Chinese art was in truth not quite as exotic as its stereotype suggested, but was instead as readily enjoyable and intelligible as Western art. He believed the exoticism of the earlier period should now be laid to rest. In “Some Aspects of Chinese Art,” in *Transformations* (1926), he wrote, “Now I believe this is a mistaken fear. Chinese art is in reality extremely accessible to the European sensibility.... A man need not be a Sinologist to understand the aesthetic appeal of a Chinese statue” (68). Fry agreed, though, that Chinese bronzes were somewhat exotic, “Here, I think, the exotic quality of all very early art, together with the exotic quality more or less present in all Chinese objects, make a favourable appeal.” Yet he added that although “These rich and elaborate bronzes are exotic certainly,” yet they were “not too exotic” (69).

Fry’s writing on Chinese architecture will help us further understand the vacillating rhetorical devices and the cultural predicament of his submission to, and arrogation of, Chinese art. As Fry wrote in his *Last Lectures*, the “Chinese wooden pavilions, with their great protruding and upturned roofs do strike us as odd, fantastic and exotic, and indeed these forms have so seized on the European imagination that they have become symbols of the Chinese style” (98-99). Fry criticized this type of building style that had inspired European *Chinoiserie*: “The main fault of Ming and later Chinese art lies in the love of excessive adornment and over-rich detail” (“Walls” 815). Fry, however, reconceptualized Chinese architecture, and his reconceptualization was based on the more archaic and monumental type of Chinese pagodas, pavilions and architecture of the T’ang period. His refashioning of ancient Chinese building accorded with the general trend of primitivism and set the new notion of monumentality itself apart from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western fad with fanciful Chinese architecture and building styles.

Fry not only rediscovered the monumental type of Chinese architecture, but also attributed a modernist clean-cut aesthetics of plain simplicity, mass elegance and simple

archaicity into it. For instance, in a review of Oswald Sirén's 1924 book *The Walls and Gates of Peking*, a collection of 109 photogravures after photographs taken in China,⁵ in *Nation and Athenaeum* (14 Mar. 1925), Fry compared an unbroken Chinese wall space to New York buildings:

Here, except for the woodwork and roofs of the upper parts of the towers, nothing but the plainest wall surfaces were admitted. In these towers the walls were pierced by rows of large rectangular loopholes arranged with complete symmetry and disposed with a fine sense for the proportion of hollow to surface. We get from these rows of rectangular openings which surmount a great height of unbroken wall space a sense at once of enormous mass and of elegance which it would be hard to match in any other architecture. It has, on a much smaller scale, though with a far greater sense of grandeur, some likeness to the happiest effects of some recent New York monster buildings. (815)

This demonstrates again that rediscovery was actually reinterpretation and reinvention. In the previous century, the British had been more captivated by the extremely prolonged and elongated flying eaves of the Chinese pagoda, which influenced the architecture by Sir William Chambers (1726-1796) in the Kew Gardens, formally The Royal Botanic Gardens, near London. Now, Fry had fashioned, refashioned and drawn dissimilar conclusions based on different kinds of Chinese art and objects.

To modulate the extreme waywardness of *Chinoiserie*, Fry introduced comparisons with classical notions of proportion, structure and measurement. For example, on the Tang pagoda, Ta Yen Ta, Fry remarked, “we feel at once that it belongs to our classic tradition. Though the cornices are carried out further than Italian architects would have done, we instantly understand the main idea and accept without difficulty the choice of proportions” (98). On another pagoda at Si-An Fu, Shensi (AD 652), Fry went into an elaborate

⁵ The Swedish art historian Oswald Sirén, Fry's friend and a contributor to *Burlington Magazine*, published a pioneering study on relatively early Chinese stone sculpture and architecture. Like Fry, Sirén turned from early European Renaissance and Primitives to Chinese art; also like Fry, he reformulated the concept of Chinese sculpture and architecture as massive forms of “monumentality.” The early pagodas that appealed to both Fry and Sirén presented a combined impression of monumentality and archaicity. Sirén spent some years in Asia during and after the First World War, and traveled with his camera.

explanation to try to show the affinity between the ancient Chinese building and the Western Renaissance one:

This pagoda (135) is of course rather strange, but chiefly because we have no similar structures, for the pagoda is not a tower but an elongated stupa, which was a dome put to cover relics or mark a holy spot. I find it, however, quite easily acceptable in the proportion and salience of these decorative ridges. And at all events the base of this pagoda is pure Renaissance in style. These octagonal pilasters and the panels between them might almost have been designed by Vasari or some mid-sixteenth-century Italian. (*Last* 99)

The above quotation reveals another rhetorical paradox between Western rationality and anti-rationality. Fry had a very ambivalent attitude towards Greek art and towards rationality. He spent a large part of his life trying to be scientific and logical, yet his critique of Greek art in *Last Lecturers* was in effect a critique of Graeco-Christian rationalism, and in *Last Lectures*, he realized the inadequacy of science and logic. As he wrote in a letter to Kenneth Clark in 1933: “In the end I’ve become quite sceptical about any possibility of an objective standard in art but at the same time thinking that perhaps it doesn’t matter” (Sutton 2: 681).

Fry’s ambivalence towards rationality and science is also reflected in his defense of Chinese art. Reacting against the Western perception of decorative Chinese art, Fry consistently mounted the case against nineteenth-century cultural imperialism and the pseudo-scientism of conceiving Chinese art to be “unscientific.” To reconcile rationality with the stereotypical view of Chinese civilization as devoid of scientific development, in his *Last Lectures* Fry continually argued that “although China has never developed a scientific tradition as we have, there is nothing inimical to the scientific attitude in the Chinese way of apprehending external reality” (98). This aspect of Fry’s perspective is crucial to his rationalization of how Chinese art, while defying all quasi-scientific Renaissance rules, could still be a better alternative for modern artists than Renaissance representationalism.

Linked with Fry's discourse of rationality was his Hellenization of Chinese art. This Hellenization, and Fry's other rhetoric devices, may now lead us to reconsider his Orientalism. He, like most of his generation, could hardly eschew the influence of Hegel's aesthetics and historical vision. Fry assumed the garment of Hegel's Orientalism as well. For Hegel, China, along with India, dwelled in the twilight zone before the dawn of civilization. Fry, however, placed China on a different schema. He realigned China with Greece, and envisioned each as having developed independent rational civilizations (*contra* Hegel). Fry considered Hindu, Mohammedan, pre-Columbian and African civilizations in the other lesser domain. For Fry, Chinese art, like Greek art, achieved a perfect equilibrium between rationality and sensibility:

Now these two great centres of civilization [Greek and Chinese] ... [b]oth have attained to a rationalist conception of the world. In both, logical deductions are more or less widely accepted as valid ... but even this is sufficient to give a peculiar colour to the civilizations in which it occurs—a colour which distinguishes European and Chinese civilizations sharply from Hindu and Mohammedan cultures or those of pre-Columbian America and Africa. (*Last* 97-98)

Throughout his career, Fry's writings show that he continually wavered between Orientalism and anti-Orientalism. He placed Chinese art on the same scale with Greek art; in that aspect, he was anti-orientalist. His view of Indian and Japanese art, however, was fully orientalist.

While refashioning himself into a modernist from a traditional connoisseur, Fry also modernized and reinvented a new discourse on Chinese art; both of these processes took place at the same time. It is, however, difficult to gauge whether Chinese art inspired Fry's modernist concepts or whether Fry's modernist concepts led him to remake "Chinese art," or, more precisely, British notions of Chinese art. We may be sure that when Fry translated Chinese aesthetics into modernist language and also redacted the modernist vocabulary back into Chinese art, he negotiated between Chinese aesthetics and Western art. Fry, for instance, among other Sinologists, translated Taoist aesthetics into English modernist vocabularies. He took the Chinese aesthetic argot, "ch'i-yun-sheng-tung," or "ch'i-yun,"

and remade it into modernist terminology: “rhythms,” “linearity,” “uniqueness,” “unpredictability,” “chance,” “variety,” “vitality” and “sensibility.” These formalist terms increasingly became an essential part of high modernist patois. The free-style abstract expressionists of the 1950s and 1960s can be traced to the discussion of rhythm and vitality in the era of Fry’s High Modernism.

As part of his rhetoric, Fry’s formalism enabled him to make a questionable but interesting comparison between Chinese and European art. Perhaps intending to make Chinese painting accessible, in *Transformations* Fry likened a Han tomb painting to the drawings of Giotto, Donatello, Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt on the ground of “calligraphic linearity” (131). Fry maintained that both “the principles of Chinese design and the nature of their rhythms” were not unfamiliar, as one could “point to certain much-loved European artists who are nearer in this respect to the Chinese than they are to certain other great European artists” (68).

Of particular interest are Fry’s remarks concerning the supposed propinquity to Chinese art of some Western artists. Fry’s comparison between East and West was a metaphor that operated on a principle of equivalence. In the article, “Claude,” in *Burlington Magazine* 11 (1907), Fry wrote of Claude (de) Lorrain (1600-1682): “Here we find not only Claude the prim seventeenth-century classic, but Claude the romanticist, anticipating the chief ideas of Corot’s later development, and Claude the impressionist, anticipating Whistler and the discovery of Chinese landscape” (272). In 1919, Fry wrote: “Well, in Paris I found a young artist hitherto almost unknown to me: Rouault, who is surely one of the great geniuses of all times. I can only compare his drawings to the T’ang art of the Chinese, of which only a few specimens remain” (Sutton 2: 476). Similarly, in *Last Lectures*, Fry found Seurat a parallel to a presumable T’ang painter:

It is a very curious fact that the Chinese, who discarded the obvious effects of light and shade in their rendering of persons and objects, should have been thus sensitive to the far subtler tone relations by which we express such atmospheric effects—and should in this direction have

anticipated Western art by nearly 1000 years.... Perhaps Seurat gives us our nearest European parallel, and he too, like this Tang artist [of a landscape attributed to Wang Wei], relied mainly for his expression upon the feeling for intervals. (149)

The concept of “empty space” was unprecedented in Western art, and, according to Fry, Seurat’s use of the technique indicated a possible Chinese influence. Michael Sullivan notes in *A Short History of Chinese Art* (1967): “The very concept of completion is utterly alien to the Chinese way of thinking. The Chinese painter deliberately avoids a complete statement.... His landscape is not a final statement, but a starting point; not an end, but the opening of a door” (182-83). Fry noted in *Transformations* (1926):

Who before Seurat ever conceived exactly the pictorial possibilities of empty space? Whoever before conceived that such vast areas of flat, unbroken surface as we see in his “Gravelines” could become the elements of a pictorial design? And yet nothing less “empty,” pictorially speaking, can be imagined. (250)

In *Seurat*, Fry noted particularly an affinity in poetical evocative effects in both traditions of English landscape and the landscape of China and Japan: “A great deal of the landscape of China and Japan is based precisely on the poetical evocations of these motives and English landscape has often tended in the same direction” (22).

Fry’s early discussion of the concept of “empty space” has been largely overlooked by Western art history. The concept of “empty space” became more accepted later on in Abstract Expressionism in Europe and the U.S., under the influence of Zen painting in the 1950s and 1960s. We also find that Western paintings were on course to discard the “subject” and representation, and started to emphasize calligraphic vitality and the play between “empty space” and “brushes,” and the play between “empty space” and “colors.” These new concepts have been influenced by Chinese aesthetics of interplay between “voidness” and “being,” aesthetic concepts originally derived from Taoism. This later experimentation in abstraction, I believe, can be traced to Fry and his advocating a modernist aesthetics influenced by Chinese aesthetics.

Discovery of Chinese painting in the early twentieth century had to be rerouted through precedents of linearity found in the Western tradition itself. In *Transformations* again, Fry claimed that the feature of linearity in the paintings of the Italian artists such as Ambrogio Lorenzetti and Botticelli, and even Ingres, resembled that of Chinese painting.

Certainly to our eyes the linear rhythms of the Chinese artists present no difficulty. We are familiar with very similar ones in much Italian art. The contour drawing of certain pictures by Ambrogio Lorenzetti comes very close indeed to what we can divine of the painting of the great periods. Botticelli is another case of an essentially Chinese artist. He, too, relies almost entirely on linear rhythms for the organisation of his design, and his rhythm has just that flowing continuity, that melodious ease which we find in the finer examples of Chinese painting. Even Ingres has been claimed, or denounced, as the case may be, as a “Chinese” painter; and with some reason, for he, too, holds intensely to his linear scheme, and, however plastic the result, even the plasticity is effected more by the exact planning of the linear contour than by any other means which the European can rely on. (73)

Fry also found a feasible resonance in Chinese art with Cézanne’s distortion of perspective, composition and space. In the article on Cézanne in *Burlington Magazine* 16 (1910), Fry commented, “What astonishes us most in Cézanne’s work is certainly his research for form, or, to be exact, for deformation” (271). Of Cézanne’s deformation in “Comptoir, verre et pommes”, Fry wrote in 1927: “One is not astonished to find that Cézanne has deformed them into oblongs with rounded ends. This deformation deprives the oval of its elegance and thinness and gives it the same character of gravity and amplitude that the spheres possess.... [T]his deformation occurs constantly in early Chinese art, and doubtless at the dictates of the same instinctive feeling” (*Cézanne* 46). Fry argued that Cézanne stripped his subjects down to their essential forms while at the same time flattening the composition.

Whether Cézanne had actually seen Chinese art in the same way that Fry claimed remains subject to further verification. Cézanne indeed pioneered a line of modernist assault on our retinas, flouting Renaissance composition and perspectives. In this sense, his flattening composition using multiple perspectives came close to Chinese art. He

avored playing tricks with perspective, and thereby broke all the rules of optical illusions and mapped a new territory for modern art to explore. As far as non-perspective or multiple-perspective art is concerned, however, Fry was unerring: unconventional perspectives, in both Cézanne and Chinese painting, had a similar capacity to astound.

Finding parallels and possible influences between Chinese art and modern Western art was another rhetorical invention of Fry to justify unconventional experimentation in modern movements. Trends in modern sculpture deploying the continuous, elongated archetypal oval forms were owed, in Fry's opinion, to Chinese influence. For instance, Brancusi and Maillol seemed to Fry to have deliberately adopted the ovoid and cylindrical forms often found in Chinese sculpture in order to react against the Greek tradition (*Transformations* 76, 102).⁶ Much ink has been spilt by art historians over the ovoid shape in modern sculpture, especially Brancusi's eggs and birds. Among them, Fry, however, was the first to point out the Chinese influence on Brancusi's ovoid shape from Buddhist sculpture. Fry noted in *Transformations*, "In this connection, it is interesting that among the many instances of Chinese influence on Modern Western art we may note a tendency among contemporary sculptors to accept this ovoid schema. Brancusi is, of course, the most striking example" (76). The Chinese, Fry argued, had a better feeling for plasticity than the Europeans: "Plastic forms in the round are, I think, always referred, however unconsciously, to some basic mental schema. It seems to me that the Chinese keep as their basic schema and point of departure the egg, whereas the European bases himself on the cube, or some simple polyhedron" (100).

Like Fry, Bell also metaphorically compared Western art with Chinese art. In *Since Cézanne* (1922), Bell commented on Brancusi: "[T]he delicacy of his touch, which gives

⁶ Brancusi, a Rumanian sculptor, settled in Paris in 1904. Fry knew his work before this date, met him through the introduction of Micu Diamand, a friend of the artist and a compatriot. Fry owned a work by him (Sutton 2: 704). Fry wrote in a letter, "I went to see Brancusi. He's a friend of Diamand and a most

sometimes to his modelling almost the quality of Wei sculpture, he learnt from no one—such things not being taught” (22). In “The Art of Brancusi” (1925), Bell again discussed Brancusi’s profound sense of relations of space and his sense of quality, which inevitably brings to mind the finest Wei and T’ang sculptors (43-45).

Commenting on Bonnard’s style, Bell distinguished two methods of painting: the “architectural design” of the European and the “imposed design” of the Chinese. As the European painter applied oil paint layer by layer, in a metaphorical sense, Western painting thus resembled constructing a house from its very foundation. A Chinese artist, on the other hand, considered the overall structure of his painting before he ever applied the ink. The distinctive point that Bell tried to make was that Bonnard was in truth closer to the Chinese way of spatial composition:

There is something Chinese about him. Bonnard is one of those rare Europeans who have dealt in “imposed” rather than “built-up” design. Bonnard’s pictures grow not as trees; they float as water-lilies.... [T]he design of a picture by Bonnard, like that of many Chinese pictures and Persian textiles, seems to be laid on the canvas as one might lay cautiously on dry grass some infinitely precious figured gauze. (*Since* 103)

We cannot dismiss Bell’s analogy for Bonnard as whimsicality. Like his generation of French painters, Bonnard, as a matter of fact, was indeed keen on Oriental painting. At this current stage of mainstream scholarship, we do not know if Bonnard was particularly interested in Chinese art, but he was inspired by the *manga*, or comic sketches, in Hokusai’s illustrated pocketbooks (Ives 11, 14).

Presuming that Fry and Bell genuinely and truthfully believed what they claimed, the late twentieth-century observer may ask why they made connections that appear for some so far-fetched? Sir Kenneth Clark, for instance, expressed his doubts, arguing that such comparisons as Fry made were no more than a flight of fancy. In the introduction to Fry’s *Last Lecture*, Clark wrote, “A few of the judgments expressed in these lectures seem to me

charming creature, as simple and unworldly as possible” (Sutton 2: 523).

rather fantastic. The Han painting in Fig. 195 looks to me like a scribble on a piece of well-used blotting paper, but Fry ... compares it to Giotto, Donatello, Leonardo da Vinci and Rembrandt" (xviii).

To address this question, one first must place them within the function of formalism, as it was formalism which enabled them to make cross-cultural comparisons. Fry's and Bell's formalism was inherently paradoxical. In the first place, the trans-cultural significance of formalism was predicated upon an ahistorical and acultural reading of non-Western art. To repoliticize Fry's and Bell's formalism neither argues for nor against formalism. Formalism existed in its own historical and political context and must be recontextualized within that context. Within its own context, the formalist task was paradoxical.

Second, one must also recognize that the imperative urgency of modernity prodded Fry to look at Chinese art in an utterly new light as he was formulating his modernist aesthetics. Ultimately, Fry reinvented modernity in Chinese art. In *Quarterly Review* 212 (1910), Fry reviewed Binyon's *Painting in the Far East* (1908), saying, "Mr. Binyon well describes what must be the most surprising fact to any European who first sees, even in reproduction, a Sung landscape, namely, the extreme Modernity of these painters" ("Oriental" 228). We recall that Binyon once interpreted Whistler's (mis)reading of Japanese art as abstract art; Fry agreed with Binyon when he read modernity into Sung painting and pursued for himself the possibilities for reading modernity into Chinese painting.

In the modernist view, linearity, i.e., pure lines without shadow and depth, legitimized modernist expression and represented a liberation from Renaissance illusionist tradition. In two installments of "Line as a Means of Expression in Modern Art," in *Burlington Magazine* 33 (1918) and 34 (1919) respectively, Fry maintained that revolutionary modern painting was being liberated from the harness of representational accuracy, and that the

lack of a third dimension in Chinese painting presented itself as a useful alternative in this liberation.

Before the modernist movement, Chinese painting had been repeatedly criticized by Europeans for a want of volume and dimensionality, in other words, for being anti-illusionistic. Fry railed against this bias; quite to the contrary, he argued that the contours of lines, namely, flat composition and organization of lines, in Chinese painting generated “plasticity” and “volume.” In the *Last Lectures*, Fry argued against European verisimilitude, claiming that naturalism and realism did not necessarily generate “vitality.” The High Renaissance artists, Fry held, had deliberately stifled vibrancy in the interest of ideal representations of “truth” (43-44).

Fry’s remaking of Chinese aesthetics appeared to be an anti-Enlightenment enterprise. He directed his unconventional arguments at overturning the Renaissance canon: what the West used to think of as illusionism did not bring about life, and what the West used to ridicule in Chinese painting as “unrealistic” actually brought about life and spirit. To accommodate Chinese art within the Western aesthetic canon, one had first to challenge and rearrange the Western canon. In canonical reshuffling, “primitive art” (including “Historical Primitives” and non-Western art) was placed above the Renaissance.

In *Quarterly Review* 212 (1910), while reviewing four Oriental art books, Fry asserted that only recently had European artists started to shed chiaroscuro and accept the Oriental rejection of light and shade. He pointed out that since the Chinese and Japanese artists “rejected light and shade as belonging primarily to the sculptor’s art; they therefore never arrived, as the Europeans did, at the idea of chiaroscuro” (“Oriental” 231-32). Fry concluded that in “Certain broad effects of lighted and shaded atmosphere, effects of mist, of night, and of twilight, they [the Chinese and Japanese artists] have for six centuries shown the way which only quite modern European art has begun to follow.”

In summation, Fry and Bell were ambivalently both promoters and appropriators of Chinese art. We can see that their writings on Chinese art functioned as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, they inspired a revolt against realistic representation in the Western tradition and criticized a long tradition of stylized *Chinoiserie*, which was, for Fry, “a particular mixture of fancy, ingenuity and fun,” and “often rather tiresome” (*Transformations* 80-81). Through their attentive, scientific and formalistic analysis, Chinese aesthetics was assimilated into the British modernist sensibility. On the other hand, Fry and Bell were appropriators of Chinese art. They may have been more willing than their nineteenth-century imperialist precursors, such as John Ruskin and Herbert Spencer and others, to praise, and submit to, the Chinese aesthetic tradition, but Chinese art continued to serve them as an instrumental Other, for Fry’s and Bell’s universal formalism risked stripping Chinese art of its cultural specificity.

IV. Re-Politicizing Bloomsbury: Paradoxes of Formalism and Imperialism/Anti-Imperialism

Critics of the Bloomsbury school, whether for or against its basic tenets, all tend to either overlook the cross-cultural significance of Bloomsbury’s formalism, or fail to see its connection between their brand of formalism and imperialism. We must therefore situate the Bloomsbury’s interpretation of Chinese art within the context of Cambridge socialist liberalism and its anti-imperialist and humanitarian stance with China. Fry’s and Bell’s liberal views of Chinese art were tied to Bloomsbury’s anti-imperialist stance within the British Empire and in relation to China. Furthermore, Bloomsbury’s views on world art and history were enmeshed within fully encoded discourses of imperialism and anti-imperialism. It is therefore important to relocate Bloomsbury’s aesthetics of Chinese art in relation to the international role of China in an imperialist world system.

Bloomsbury's stance against militarism and imperialism occurred, as Raymond Williams put it, at "a specific moment of the development of liberal thought" (62). In the late nineteenth century, a small party of socialists was already shaping liberal opinion. In 1883, the Fabian Society was formed in London by Sidney and Beatrice Webb and George Bernard Shaw. In 1902, the staggering defeat in the Boer War, while an embarrassment for the nation, divided the Labour Party into factions. The rise of English Socialism and, most significantly, of the Labour Party suggested that the focus of liberal opinion began to shift from the middle to the lower class. Later on, several Bloomsbury members, such as Bertrand Russell and Leonard Woolf, were involved with the Fabian Society and the Labour Party, suggesting that Bloomsbury's liberalism was inclined towards socialism. By the time the Bloomsburyites came on the scene, the liberal bourgeoisie started to be less enthusiastic for imperial conquest. Opposed to imperial expansion, Bloomsburyites were the most vocal of the pacifists, seeing the rise of the nation state as only a temporary phase in the evolution towards a truly global civilization. They were also skeptical of claims justifying war.

The major inherent paradox of Bloomsbury as a cultural group, as Williams pointed out, is though they were an oppositional group, but their members were, by and large, members of the cultural elite. The Bloomsburyites emerged from Cambridge University at a time when old universities were reformed as a result of comprehensive development and reform of the professional and cultural life of bourgeois England during the second half of the nineteenth century. The Bloomsburyites undeniably formed an "intellectual aristocracy" composed of those who were well-heeled, well-born, well-traveled, and well-read. This was the set that, as Herbert Read put it, "led the literary and art worlds of London through their pens" (*Coat* 282). To belong to the national life, as Matthew Arnold noted in *Culture and Anarchy* in 1869, one had to be affiliated either with the Anglican Church or Oxbridge. His observation still held, at least until High Modernism. It was

therefore no surprise that during the “High Modernist” period, the aesthetic oppositional group first came from within an established central position of the English society.

The Bloomsburyites’ central position also derived from their familial ties with the British Empire. They were significantly involved with the upper levels of colonial administration, as was the case, for instance, in Lytton Strachey’s family. Additionally, Duncan Grant’s father, Lytton’s uncle, was also a career soldier in India. Grant spent his childhood in India and then shuttled back and forth between England and India during his father’s furloughs (Edel 142). Unlike Kipling, then, the Bloomsburyites’ colonial experiences finally led them to oppose empire, Keynes being perhaps the only exception. Keynes was more ambiguous on the issue of the British Empire. As a pacifist, he was of the opinion that one should sustain the mechanism of reorganizing the imperial power rather than protesting against the government. For many who emerged as vocal opponents to imperialism, this opposition grew slowly, often through an experience of life in the colonized world. In October 1904, Leonard Woolf sailed for Ceylon as a cadet in the Ceylonese civil service. Woolf recalled that when he sailed, he was “a very innocent, unconscious imperialist” (*Growing* 25). In Ceylon his social conscience, however, soon led him to condemn the imperialist system. E. M. Forster’s travels and employment in 1921 as private secretary to the Maharajah of Dewas also led him to be critical of the British Empire. The result of their colonial service and growing belief that imperial rivalries among the European Powers was a major cause of World War, led Forster and Woolf to adopt a version of anti-imperialism, which was directly related to their internationalism (Edel and Brantlinger).

In one sense, the Bloomsbury group, and its resultant responses to the war, at least, was a product of opposition to British liberalism, a liberalism that had reached a high point of development. As Williams argued, there was a certain liberalization and modernization at the levels of personal relationships, aesthetic enjoyment and intellectual openness, and

“coming to contact with other cultures” (59). This liberalization and modernization was of course a quite general tendency, and such a liberal tendency became more evident especially “after the shocks of the 1914-18 war and, later, the loss of Empire” (59).

We can push Williams’s argument that the Bloomsburyites chose their opposition by positioning themselves outside their own class and siding with the marginalized, the colonized and the exploited. We might admire, even as we suspect, this kinship with the oppressed, which led Bloomsbury members to take up the standard for such impoverished countries as China. Among the Bloomsbury associates, G. L. Dickinson (1862-1932) and Russell were the main spokespersons on the issue of China, and I believe Fry’s and Bell’s liberal attitude towards Chinese art developed under their influence. Dickinson was a young don at King’s College when Keynes, Leonard Woolf and Clive Bell went up to university. Dickinson, a sinophile, was enamored of the idea that he had been Chinese in a previous incarnation. As a Christian socialist, Dickinson was also strongly opposed to British imperialism, and thus an ardent critic of China’s subordination to Western Powers in the nineteenth century. His 1913 *Letters from John Chinaman* criticized Western civilization as capitalist, aggressive and anti-nature, while it romanticized Chinese civilization as pastoral, peace-loving and in harmony with nature. This book was also essentially an anti-imperialist tract, and epitomized the dissent of the war years. Writing against the background of the Boxer Uprising and the European expedition to suppress it, Dickinson condemned the charade of imperial countries to conceal their economic exploitation behind an appeal to noble Christian evangelical ideals (Pollock 23).

After World War I, in 1922, Bertrand Russell, a British philosopher, Bloomsbury associate, and, like Dickinson, a teacher at Cambridge, wrote *The Problem of China*, a sympathetic analysis of China’s cultural, political and economical plight under the exploitation of world capitalism and imperialism. Like Dickinson’s *Letters from John Chinaman*, Russell also romanticized China’s pastoralism, quietism, peace-loving nature

and culture. Russell lamented the “instinctive happiness, or joy of life” that the Western countries “have lost through industrialism and the high pressure at which most of us live,” and that “its commonness in China is a strong reason for thinking well of Chinese civilization” (12).

Russell also attacked the ills of Western industrialism, the idea of progress and the over-emphasis on science and material culture, capitalistic competitiveness and imperialism. There were several aspects to Western imperialism that Russell assailed, including missionary imperialism, economic imperialism, military imperialism and cultural imperialism. Russell noted, “white men have gone to China with three motives: to fight, to make money, and to convert the Chinese to our religion.... But the soldier, the merchant, and the missionary are alike concerned to stamp our civilization upon the world; they are all three, in a certain sense, pugnacious” (196-97).

Russell assailed the hypocrisy of the West’s Open Door policy in China, which, for him, was a way of exploiting China in the name of free trade liberal capitalism. Russell was critical of the Washington Conference after World War I, for it only reaffirmed the imperialist interests, of both Western Powers and Japan, in China. Because of the Open Door policy, Russell wrote, “The Four Powers—America, Great Britain, France, and Japan—have agreed to exploit China in combination, not competitively” (179).

China became important for Russell because he saw China as a touchstone for exercising better international cooperation. Since capitalism and free trade had failed, international cooperation and socialism would be the solution. Russell reasoned that the Chinese could not escape economic domination by foreign Powers unless either China became militarily strong or such foreign Powers became socialist. Russell argued thus, “A strong military China would be a disaster; therefore Socialism in Europe and America affords the only ultimate solution” (64). China was then not yet fully industrialized, and was certainly one of the most undeveloped areas left in the world. Russell recognized that

whether the resources of China were to be developed by China, by Japan, or by the Western Powers was a question of enormous importance, “affecting not only the whole development of Chinese civilization, but the balance of power in the world, the prospects of peace, the destiny of Russia, and the chances of development towards a better economic system in the advanced nations” (15).

The solution for China, as Russell envisioned it, was internationalism; internationalism in the sense of international cooperation and international socialism. This brings us to the efforts of Bloomsbury during World War I. The rise of Bloomsbury’s pacifism, internationalism and international sympathies derived from a mixture of liberal cosmopolitanism and international socialism. Liberal cosmopolitanism was based on their notion of individual freedom and civilized society, in which, as Bell proclaimed in *Civilization*, “civilized people can talk about anything” (133). Civilized society was founded on reason, toleration of diversity, and individualism. On the other hand, there was another strand of international socialism in this liberal notion of cosmopolitanism, at least as Dickinson, Russell and Leonard Woolf demonstrated. Russell, Dickinson, and Leonard Woolf all intended to examine the diplomatic origins of the war and advocated an international authority to prevent future wars. They wanted to prevent the war by organizing an “international government,” from which the idea for a “League of Nations” came from, and their analysis of the causes of war pointed both to capitalism and imperialism as culprits. Leonard Woolf, for instance, was commissioned in 1915 by the Fabian Society to study the causes of the war. His *International Government* (1916) explored ways of making wars less likely in the future, and thus became the blueprint for the “League of Nations.” Woolf, Dickinson and Russell all believed that only a social system based on cooperation and the common ownership of resources could bring about lasting peace. As Russell wrote in *The Problem of China*, “peace alone can never be secure until international Socialism is established throughout the world” (183-84).

Fry was continually interested in the relationship between art and society, even though he was anxious that it should not be overemphasized (Q. Bell, "Roger" 7). Fry was skeptical about the relationship between art and society, and between art and morals, as he argued in "Expression and Representation in the Graphic Arts": "Art then is in this sense at least definitely non-moral and Tolstoi's [sic] great mistake was the attempt to drag it forcibly into the moral atmosphere of life" (rpt. in Reed 64). Because of this skepticism, most of his political views were not expressed in his art criticism, but rather in private letters. That discrepancy between the public and the private constituted another layer of paradox for Fry. Publicly, Fry was deceptively apolitical, yet privately, he voiced his strong opinions against World War I and militarism.

These strong opinions were no doubt rooted in Cambridge liberalism, which formed the basis of the humanitarianism of Bloomsbury and had a profound impact on Fry's and Bell's broad-mindedness towards Chinese art and culture. Fry was by no means the reactionary or the narrow-minded elitist that many critics perceive him to be. In Cambridge, Fry was much closer to the poet R. C. Trevelyan,⁷ John McTaggart, Dickinson and Charles Robert Ashbee. Quentin Bell, son of Vanessa (Virginia Woolf's sister) and Clive Bell, once said of this group:

This older generation of Cambridge was touched by the socialist revival of the eighties. It was altogether more political and less aesthetic than Cambridge at the beginning of the century. Although Fry's position was never defined in party political terms and although the Omega Workshop was quite different programme and policy from Ashbee's socio-aesthetic adventures, something of Cambridge liberalism persists in his critical thought. ("Roger" 7)

In 1903, Fry, Dickinson and other Apostolic brethren,⁸ Nathaniel Wedd and G. M. Trevelyan, brother of R. C. Trevelyan, founded a new monthly magazine, *The Independent*

⁷ R. C. Trevelyan visited China and was also a collector of Chinese art. In Fry's letter to G. L. Dickinson (31 May 1913), while Dickinson was traveling in China, Fry wrote, "The Chinese pictures Bob's got aren't much (tho' they're pleasant and pretty things)" (Sutton 2: 368).

⁸ In May 1887, Fry was elected to the famous liberal Apostles Society. Formally known as the Cambridge Conversazione Society, this exclusive society restricted its membership to twelve. Desmond MacCarthy,

Review. The first number appeared in October, and Fry designed the cover. According to Marvin Ronald Pollock, “The major aim of the review was political. It was founded to combat the aggressive imperialism and protectionist campaign of Joseph Chamberlain and his followers” (25). Later, during World War I, Fry’s liberal intellectual friends, including G. M. Trevelyan, Russell and Dickinson, formed a society and called itself the Neutrality Committee (Pollock 85).

Like most other Bloomsbury members, Fry celebrated notions of culture, civilization and individuality, but on the other hand, he was attracted to the other end of social reform. The ambiguity between Left and Right, between Toryism and Socialism, fully permeated the politics of Bloomsbury members. Since his early Cambridge days, Fry was indeed very self-conscious about the split of his cultural and political position. To Ashbee, Fry wrote on 22 October 1887, “you would have been surprised at my Socialism, but then you never can see what a socialist I am because you always have the effect of bringing out all my Toryism, all my love of aristocracy and culture” (Sutton 1: 115). In 1889 Fry wrote to Dickinson, “I’m going to have a room with a fire in it where I shall ... have Socialists all unbeknown to the rest of the family, and we can plot the destruction of society till any hour of the night” (Sutton 1: 122). Although Fry wrote these words when he was a young college student, they nevertheless epitomized the complex and delicate position of Fry’s politics that was caught between two tendencies of Toryism and Socialism throughout his life. Fry’s link to the guild-based form of socialism can be seen from the fact that, as a young man, he participated in a number of Arts and Crafts guilds, including the Guild of

Bertrand Russell, George Edward Moore, among other distinguished minds, were the other older brethren. This liberal group was all loosely associated with the Bloomsbury. Among the younger Bloomsburyites, Clive Bell, Thoby Stephen, Lytton Strachey and Leonard Woolf entered Trinity College in 1899, while John Maynard Keynes attended King’s College. All Cambridge Bloomsburyites except Bell had all been elected in different years as the Apostles, the same society to which Fry belonged a decade ago. Bell belonged to another reading group, the Midnight Society. These were the decisively influential Cambridge years before the formation of the Bloomsbury group.

Handicraft, founded by Ashbee, and the Century Guild. The Omega Workshops that Fry founded from 1913 to 1919 is another link that harkened back to the guilds of the Victorian radicals.

This mixture of formalist aestheticism and conservative socialism is one of the baffling complexities that eludes the understanding of critics of Bloomsbury who mistake Bloomsbury aesthetics as purely of the “art for art’s sake” school. Tied to this cultural paradox between aestheticism and socialism is another one between elitism and populism. The prospect of bridging the gap between the cultural elite and the people allowed Fry to remain a member of the elite culture, while at the same time empathizing with the public. Bell was also caught between individual elitism and liberal socialism, and while most concerned with good taste and civilization, as Quentin Bell reminisced in *Bloomsbury Recalled*, “My father, Clive Bell, was in those days a left-wing radical. From an early age I knew that we were odd” (2).

Like many other Bloomsburyites, Clive Bell and Fry were conscientious objectors in the First World War, when in 1916 the Government decided to impose compulsory military service.⁹ Fry had good reason to object to World War I, not only because his Omega Workshops was mired in financial difficulty because of the War, but, as he wrote in 1914, “What we want to do now is to denounce militarism and diplomacy, which have led us to this abyss” (Sutton 2: 380).¹⁰ He wrote in 1920: “Of all the religions that have afflicted

⁹ Leonard, Bertrand Russell, the Stracheys, and other Bloomsburyites joined the Union for Democratic Control, an organization opposing conscription, formed in 1915. When conscription began, Fry himself was exempt from military service due to his age (Spalding 196). Both Lytton Strachey and Leonard Woolf were excused from military service on medical grounds (although Strachey’s request for exemption as a conscientious objector was denied) (*Beginning* 176-78). Clive Bell, Duncan Grant, Bertrand Russell and the Strachey brothers all claimed conscientious objection. Russell spent six months in prison in 1916 for his pacifist activities (Brantlinger 151). Lytton chose pacifism, and at his tribunal hearing on 7 March 1916, stated: “I am convinced that the whole system by which it is sought to settle international disputes by force is profoundly evil...” (qtd. in Holroyd 626).

¹⁰ The letter was writing to Rose Vildrac, wife of a Parisian poet and art dealer on 14 August 1914.

man (and they are a terrible scourge) Nationalism seems to me to be the most monstrous and the most cruel” (Sutton 2: 483).¹¹ Bell was even more politically involved than Fry. In *Nation* (6 January 1915), Bell wrote a letter entitled “Conscription,” asserting that “there were many in Britain who did not share the instinctive patriotism of the upper class” (500-01); again, in another letter of the same title, “Conscription,” *Nation* (26 June 1915), Bell asked whether conscription would force Britain to reconsider its attitude to the war and whether “the triumph of British over German militarism is really worth what the people will have to pay for it” (419).

Bell wrote numerous political pamphlets calling for objection to the war by the British public and government, and grounded his objections in an individualist and elitist discussion of “civilization.” Just as the jingoists called for a war to defend Western civilization, with slogans such as “You are fighting for civilization” and “Join up, for civilization’s sake,” Bell asked in *Civilization*, “And what is this civilization for which we fight?” (8). Bell lost faith in Western civilization, and called into question the nature of this Western civilization. In *Peace for All*, he argued that fighting for so-called national interest, national honor, and national existence was like fighting for nothing at all, because the notion of “fighting for national interest” abstracted “nation,” whereas, in actuality, a “nation” was composed of individuals. Appealing to these individuals, he argued, was more truthful than slavishly accepting an abstract concept of nationalism.

Nor was Bell oblivious to British colonialist exploitation in China. In his 1915 *Peace at Once*, which was suppressed by order of the Lord Mayor of London, Bell propounded terms of peace for the British Government to adopt to end World War I. One of them called for Britain to withdraw its powers in China. Bell wrote, “Presumably Japan will not evacuate Kiao-chau. But to prove our disinterestedness we might surrender Wei-hei-Wei [Wei-hai-wei]. China and the China seas would thus be left to the yellow races, who seem

¹¹ To Marie Mauron, 20 June 1920.

to have a better right to them than the white” (42-43). Before World War I, Germany leased the port of Tsingtao and owned mining and railway rights in the province of Shantung. Britain leased the harbor of Wei-hai-wei. Although the main battlefield of World War I was in Europe, the War impacted China nonetheless, because the War resulted in repartitioning the colonial interests of Western Powers and Japan in China. As Germany was defeated in World War I, it gave up its treaty port, Tsingtao, and mining and railway rights in Shantung Province to Japan, one of the winning Allies countries in World War I, although, ironically, so was China.¹²

In another twist of irony, however, Bell was not totally objecting to the system of imperialism. In many instances, he took the position that the Western Powers should divide and rule the non-Western world. For instance, he argued, also in *Peace at Once*, “Belgium might be persuaded to sell her share of the Congo to Germany. That would be to the advantage of the Congolese.... If France would like a bit of the English Guinea coast or of Central Africa, there is no earthly reason why she should not have it” (41-42). “We might assure Germany that in future we shall not come between her and her ambitions in Asia Minor and Mesopotamia.... England might as well make a virtue of a necessity by generously giving Russia a free hand in Persia.... England should recognise the obvious fact that the settling of the Balkans is none of her business; the rest of the world might recognise the equally obvious fact that Egypt is become a British possession” (43).

V. Conclusion

That Bloomsburyites’ discourse on Chinese art was equivocally implicated in the complicated matrices of Orientalism/Anti-Orientalism and modernity/primitivity further

¹² Bertrand Russell criticized the rise of Japanese imperialism in *The Problem of China*, see 139 and 143. We

indicates the numerous paradoxes and cultural predicaments of modernism /imperialism. For Fry and Bell alike, Chinese art was subsumed under a timeless and cultureless universalism. Although Fry attempted to exclude patriotism in his detached art appreciation, claiming that the “artist’s allegiance is towards an ideal end which has nothing to do with the boundaries between nations” (*Reflections* 21), the late twentieth-century viewer realizes that appreciation is always culturally relative and cross-cultural.

The Bloomsburyites’ ostensibly acultural, totalizing holistic view actually reveals their standing in a more privileged cultural position than the Chinese. Said’s remarks on the convergence of the geographic scope of the British Empire and the mode of universalizing cultural discourses may shed light on Bloomsbury’s totalizing discourse of world art. As Said notes in *Culture and Imperialism*:

There is a convergence between the great geographical scope of the empires, especially the British one, and universalizing cultural discourses. Power makes this convergence possible, of course; with it goes the ability to be in far-flung places, to learn about other people, to codify and disseminate knowledge, to characterize, transport, install, and display instances of other cultures (through exhibits, expeditions, photographs, paintings, surveys, schools), and above all to rule them. (108)

From this perspective, Bloomsburyites’ universalizing discourse was culturally imperialist; their “significant form” that promoted a universal culture provided, in the end, an alibi for expansionism. Universalizing “culture” seems to guarantee the ideal of understanding world art, but does so by ridding native artifacts of their cultural specificity. In a general milieu of humanistic idealism and anti-imperialism, the Bloomsbury group co-opted Chinese art within a holistic conceptual construction of “world art.” This wistful romanticization of Chinese art as “primitive,” or as aligned with other “primitive” forms, attempted to collapse all cultural boundaries. Such a *mélange* that intertextualized all art and obliterated all cultural differences was culturally imperialistic. To make this statement is not to claim that Bloomsburyites were “naïve” imperialists. They were anti-imperialists,

have good reason to believe that Bell might have read Russell’s book.

but they were caught in an imperial context, as was modernism itself. The irony is that while they fought against British imperialism, their aesthetic approach of obliterating all cultural imprints nevertheless mirrored a subliminal desire for expansion of the British Empire.

It would be equally wrong, however, to claim that the Bloomsburyites were Orientalists. Their discourses on Chinese art departed from Orientalist disparaging. What Said criticizes about Orientalism, as a political discourse, undergirded a feminizing, sensual visual representation of the Middle-East by European Impressionists. That is, through systematic studies, institutionalization and administration, the West thereby came to possess the Middle East. Fry's and Bell's interpretation of Chinese art, as demonstrated, wavered constantly between submission and appropriation. Even as a way of appropriation, Bloomsburyites' fashioning of Chinese art worked against the more masculine and more modernist fashion. They primitivized, deornamented, rationalized and Hellenized Chinese art.

The major difference between the Bloomsburyites and earlier imperialists in their response to Chinese art is that the Bloomsburyites respected and admired Chinese art, so that their aestheticization of Chinese art must be seen in conjunction with their anti-imperialist politics. That is, the Bloomsburyites took a stance on anti-imperialism, especially towards the issue of China. Radical questioning of art comes in tandem with a radical questioning of the world. The aesthetic encounter with Chinese art could be profitably explored in the dimension of politics.

Although Fry and Bell may have been anti-imperialistic toward Chinese art, they were always silent about how Chinese art came to London. The discrepancy between the upper structure of transcendental world art and the lower structure of imperial and colonial history constitutes an intriguing paradox in understanding Bloomsbury's encounter with Chinese art. The formalistic notion of timeless aesthetic standards, disinterested creation,

and universal human concerns belied the underlying sordid history of imperial conquest and colonial exploitation of China. As I have discussed in my dissertation, it was the grander environment of Britain's imperial and colonial endeavors in China that created Bloomsbury's anti-imperialist views of Chinese art.

Bloomsburyites' bourgeois liberalism was founded on a cosmopolitan view of the international world in the same way that their formalism was founded on a cosmopolitan view of art. In this light, Fry's aesthetic enterprise may be understood as ideological: its function to resolve formally, at the imaginary level, social contradictions that cannot be solved in practice. At this level, the Bloomsburyites did attempt to resolve aesthetic and moral conflicts. They carried the burden of the British Empire. With a humanitarian sense of guilt, they held Chinese art in high esteem. Their admiration of Chinese art also came from their discontent with post-Renaissance art and a self-critique from Western point of view. The irony is that they were counter-hegemonic and against the Eurocentric myopic view of Western art, and yet this aesthetic formalism was in a way intended to totalize a global culture. That is, they were caught in the cultural dilemma of advocating a liberal formalism, admitting non-Western art into the Western canon, and meanwhile being constrained by a totalizing globalism.

The Bloomsbury members faced their own paradoxes, but, ironically, they created more cultural paradoxes. Their position regarding China serves an example of their equivocation. On the one hand, they felt a rapport with Chinese art and culture and opposed China's exploitation by Western imperialism. On the other hand, they were unaware that their anti-imperialism was also created and conditioned by London's cosmopolitanism, and by the yet larger imperial and colonial forces of the British Empire at that particular historical juncture. Their influence and legacy can still be felt today. Moreover, it is this Bloomsbury branch of liberalism, humanitarianism, internationalism and

formalism that set the stage for the first wave of British Modernism in the early twentieth century.

To “reacanonize” Fry and Bell does not imply a reactionary revival effort. To see their formalism as purely in the vein of “art for art’s sake,” as most critics describe it, would be naive. Their politics of formalist modernism is complicated. It widened vistas and broke down Western canons. While wrestling with myopic Eurocentrism, the Bloomsburyites revealed a cultural dilemma, that is, that liberal cosmopolitanism was created, for better and for worse, by the British imperial legacy. Bloomsbury’s liberal formalism and their purported modernity in British art were in effect a reaction against British imperialism, but of course, were conditioned as well by British imperialism.

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